

FEEDING THE ARTIST*

— ELAINE MOSS

Introduction

Being asked to address the International Board of Books for Young People—or IBBY as we (mercifully!) call ourselves—makes one feel a bit like Puck who volunteered, in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, to "put a girdle round the Earth in forty minutes." For an IBBY audience is indeed from round the world, so it surely behoves a speaker honoured with an invitation to address such an audience, to take a world view. In our case, a world view of literacy, and how to achieve it. But is this possible when the standards and practices of each country reflect the economic, social and indeed political conditions peculiar to it? Are there what one might call 'world wisdoms'—or in trying to delve for principles that are common to the world, shall we be in danger of finding merely those broad but often meaningless platitudes that our politicians feed us on television?

Let me start by saying that my experience is limited to working in Britain as a librarian and teacher, a reviewer of children's books and an organizer of exhibitions of children's books for what was, when I worked for it, the National Book League, but has now been renamed Book Trust. So, what do I know about literacy worldwide? The answer must be that in practice I know very little.

But thinking about, say, the state of literacy in the United States and comparing it with, Nigeria for instance, one is immediately struck by the idea that what might be thought to be progress in parts

of Africa could be considered retrogressive in the United States; and, conversely, some current African practices could be adopted with profit in the advanced world. To explain: in parts of the world where the publishing of books for children from their own culture is still minimal, such reading courses as are available make a degree of functional literacy for all an attainable staging post on the journey towards reading for pleasure. But to use reading schemes—basal readers, I think you call them in the United States—for English-speaking children who could have the richest children's literature in the world burgeoning from their bookshelves in school, in library, in bookshops—or even at home—must surely be a tragedy. Wherever reading CAN mean more than being literate, it seems to me to be the duty of the developed countries to see that that is what it is. For, unless the developed world uses its resources well, those resources will die. If that were to happen, if we were to cease to believe in literature as a mirror of mankind, a well of wisdom, a unifier of rich and poor, black and white, old and young, we would have allowed the new technologies to quench the flame of a torch that could have spread its light, in due course, around the world.

Similarly, if the Third World, whilst striving for basic literacy, were to abandon its oral tradition and fall victim to the alluring non-world of Dallas, it, too, would have lost a once-treasured resource of world-wide importance. For, quite apart from the richness and universal meaning of the tales themselves, oral story-telling is the foundation of literature, the beginning, the stimulus that makes children

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everywhere keen to be able to read. In Britain, thanks mainly to the efforts of our West Indian and Asian population, there is a resurgence in story-telling which, before the arrival on our shores of story-tellers like Grace Hallworth and Beulah Candappa, was a dying art. Who needs the story-teller when books and television are there to tell stories, we seemed to be saying. The answer, unexpectedly, was that we all do. For now, groups like Ben Haggerty's Crick Crack Club meet regularly and tell stories to adults, whilst individual members of his team are welcomed into schools and youth clubs.

So, from whatever region we come, we have something of value to offer to the rest of the world. The big problem, as I see it, is that most of us tend to undervalue our own resources. They are there, taken for granted; but like gardens, if they are neglected, they are quickly overrun with weeds, then choked to death.

The first plea I would like to make, then, is that each of us in this hall consider what is valuable in his or her own culture and resolve to care for, preserve and develop that.

With this plea in mind, I began to look at literacy and literature in Britain and to think about what is happening there, whether we are in danger of neglecting our heritage, how we teach reading and therefore what expectations we have of the rising generation as the readers of the future. The picture that emerges is of a nation divided, or at any rate, of an educational establishment divided, (since I suspect that the majority of our parents still feel that it is the school's duty to teach their children to read).

But how? That is the big question to which there is no simple answer. There are some theorists, of course, who believe in step by step progress through a graded scheme with a carefully controlled voca-

bulary, rather as though, in teaching your baby to talk (does anyone do this? Yet all children learn, *by imitation*) you were to insist that single syllable words came before double and treble, that present tense verbs preceded past or future, that (for this would be the result) your children learned to speak gobbledygook before they spoke the language you speak quite naturally every day. When your 3 year-old screams 'Mum' (not Mummy until she is four) will you answer 'Mum comes' instead of 'Mummy's coming'? Of course not. Children do not learn to speak by learning and then following rules. They learn by speaking, and if rules come into it at all, they come into it *after* the child has mastered language and is using it not quite to his or her own satisfaction.

It seems to me, and to many others in Britain and other parts of the English-speaking world, that learning to read is very much the same as learning to speak. What is too often not realised is that learning to read, (learning to become a reader, I should say) begins in babyhood, not in the first year at Infants School. It begins with watching parents reading books and the daily newspaper; with hearing, and joining in nursery rhymes and finger games; with being physically enfolded in the magic circle of a parent's arms and a picture-book whilst escaping in the mind to the Moon. Oh, what pleasure! As Dorothy Butler has reminded us, 'Babies NEED Books'.

If babies have had the books they need, reading can generally follow as naturally as speech follows talking. There will of course come a time in a child's reading life when his or her grasp of phonics will help with the sounding out of an unfamiliar word, but if a child has acquired a wide vocabulary by being read to and a sense of the structure of written language by hearing it, he or she is less likely to

get stuck, more likely to be able to guess sensibly, even correctly, than one who has been restricted to basal readers with their controlled vocabulary and arid sentence formation. The lucky young reader, it seems, learns the techniques of reading automatically through literary experience.

This may sound like pie in the sky; but let us now visit three primary schools, very different from one another in their approach to the teaching of reading.

Three Primary Schools: One Objective

The first is the school, where I worked recently for six years, a London inner-city school with many of the problems associated with such an area. Here, reading was taught with real books in every classroom. Just occasionally, a new teacher would doubt our official policy, fearing that her class might not be achieving literacy (at least literacy in a measurable form) as fast or as completely as would be the case with a reading scheme. Usually, that teacher was one who was not herself a reader and therefore not, like the rest of us, an enthusiast for bringing literature to the children. But, with just one exception, all those teachers became convinced that reading with real books was infinitely preferable to a controlled scheme.

In the first place, because having a plentiful supply of real books around the classroom made all sorts of pleasurable literary adventures possible for children who otherwise would have been denied them. Secondly, because the children TAUGHT EACH OTHER the joys of reading through discovering favourite picture books and thrusting them on their friends—reading them TO their friends if necessary. Thirdly, because ‘teaching reading’ became a natural round-the-day activity, not a systematised time-tabled chore. Fourthly, because it became apparent that most of their children were not only learning to read but

were becoming experienced and avid readers with all the life enhancing benefits that real readers enjoy. Even the children who were not great achievers (and we had a few, though probably far fewer than we would have had on basal readers) had begun to find themselves through the stories that were part of their everyday life.

The second school is also an inner-city school but this one has a head teacher who is committed to functional literacy and who has diligently studied all the material about reading schemes and chosen those that she believes will achieve her aim the most effectively. There the schemes are, piles of heavily fingered unattractive looking pamphlets with two-colour illustrations and well spaced-out lines of text, in which repetition of words, ‘Up, Fluff, up, up!’ is given precedence over sense, and in which story, for the most inexperienced reader at a time when story is really all that matters, is non-existent. No wonder that when I was visiting this school and I asked an eight year old girl what her book was about, she looked at me with bewilderment (quite rightly) and replied, ‘It isn’t about anything, Miss. It’s my reading book.’

It is true that scattered here and there in that school there were a few tattered ‘real books’—known there as ‘supplementary reading material’ but because reading had been presented as a senseless funless chore, as far as I could see, the children did not bother to look at them. Talking with the teachers, I got the strong impression that they thought that reading for fun was all very well for the privileged, but that HERE reading was serious business. Certainly those teachers did not themselves have time to ‘waste’ reading children’s books, so there was no way they were going to be able to make those inspired reading choices for the children, choices that I know from experience can not only change

a child's view of the task of reading, but change his life as well. The sad thing is that the children in that school came from very deprived backgrounds where there was unlikely to be much home interest in reading. They were exactly the children who most needed literacy through literature. But in pursuit of the official policy of literacy for all through basal readers, they were being denied the children's books that are every child's right. Did they all go on into secondary education proficient in the art of reading? Of course not. So, that school was achieving a double minus for many, perhaps most, of its students.

The third school is the most fascinating. This is a school in a country town in the far west of Ulster where there is a teacher, Maura MacCrea, whose special task is to teach what are known as 'remedial' children. Maura—I have never met her but we have been deep in correspondence, was embarking on a further degree in education and, as a disciple of Frank Smith, had chosen as the subject for her thesis *LEARNING TO READ BY READING*. Her first letter to me was a friendly plea: she had read much that I have written, had bought a copy of the *Signal Bookguide PICTURE BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS*, 9 to 13, had responded very positively to such of the recommended books as she could get hold of and was passionate to share these with her students. The school used reading schemes throughout, BUT was also keen on reading for pleasure and receptive to her ideas. After five years of planning, she at last had been given permission to convert an old cloakroom into a library. But 'at a time when money for books is, to put it mildly, scarce' as she wrote, would I help her to make the best possible choice so that not a penny was wasted? It was November. I had just been judging the Emil Award—an annual award

in the U.K. for a children's book in which text and illustration support enhanced one another, sensitively, dramatically, ingeniously. 50 illustrated books of high quality were on my shelf waiting for dispersal. I packed them up in sturdy boxes and sent them off to Enniskillen where they arrived just before Christmas. On January 8th a letter came from Maura. 'I have,' she wrote 'over the Christmas holidays, been enjoying *like any child* the 50 books you sent.'

My hunch had been correct. Here was a teacher with all the right instincts, only lacking the materials with which to prove her theories. She had, it seems, hit on a wonderful idea. Why not turn her group of 9 to 10 year old remedial boys (it was a boys' school) into book reviewers, encouraging them to take an interest in the books (which on first sight looked rather too young for them so might further damage their already dented *amour-propre*) by saying that she needed to know what they thought about the books as possible additions to the new school library, which would, of course, be used by boys as young as five years old. So, in the end, her thesis *LEARNING TO READ BY READING* was sub-titled: *A Group of Book Reviewers at Work*. It is an amazing and inspiring piece of work, because she traces the changes in attitude of the five boys concerned and shows how individual books, group dynamics, adult enthusiasm for the same books the boys were 'reviewing', reading by those boys to children in a younger group, and a sense of responsibility for what was to be in the school library turned those four book-phobics (the fifth was a frustrated bibliophile) into gritty, pugnacious, discerning critics and children with faith in themselves restored. As one (who had become an Anthony Browne addict) exclaimed—lifting the whole box of fifty books up high over his head at the last

session: 'Now I'm Willie the Champ'.

Maura McCrea's thesis—she kindly sent me a copy when her research had been written up—is living proof that the best in children's literature is *itself* the best teacher of reading that any child can have. In Maura's tape recordings of sessions with these five boys one can savour the gradual changing of attitudes from negative to positive—not only to books, but to life.

Feeding the Artist

I called this paper FEEDING THE ARTIST and some of you may have pondered the title, may even have thought that I was going to make a plea for higher royalties for illustrators of children's books, those people who make such a huge contribution to the developing reader by making the printed page more accessible, less intimidating. Passionate as I am about illustration right through the age range, the title I chose has nothing to do with pictures on the page.

No. The pictures I am interested in, the pictures we are going to think about together for a little while, are the pictures in the mind. The pictures in the mind of the reader. The pictures children make for themselves as they read (or are read to). These are pictures summoned up inside the head by black squiggles on a piece of paper, squiggles that mysteriously turn into words. Words that become part of sentences. Sentences that link themselves into a story **THAT HAS TO BE SEEN TO BE BELIEVED.**

The Indian artist-philosopher Ananda Coomaraswamy once remarked to the British sculptor Eric Gill (who then repeated the aphorism so often that it became attributed to him) that it is not that the artist is a special kind of man, but that every man is a special kind of artist.

Those of us who work with children know this to be true. Each child, every

day, shows himself or herself to be a special kind of artist—the younger the child, the more uninhibited and exuberant the artist. **THIS IS THE ARTIST** we have to feed. That is the reason why I called this paper FEEDING THE ARTIST.

Now it might be thought that in our electronic age, this artist has all the food he could possibly need. Children's television programmes, bad, indifferent and just occasionally good, pour forth from the screen. Hour after hour soap follows soap, Tom chases Jerry whilst on other channels, sport, sitcoms and films vie for the young viewers' ever shortening attention span. Yet when a story-teller the other day finished her story to an enthusiastic young school audience and said to the children: 'Now I've told you my story, how about you coming to tell me some of yours?' She was met with the answer 'We don't know any stories.' Shyness, perhaps? Not entirely, I think. Children today have such a quantity of stories **WITH READY-MADE PICTURES** thrust at them that, unless an image is shocking, all that remains is a senseless blur, never to be thought of again. But this story-teller persisted a little, saying, 'You can tell me a story about yourself or your family, if you like.' Then a little boy came forward and said, 'I could tell you a story. But it's very sad. It's about my friend who died...' And out came this painful story about his little friend's death, a story that the child had, his teacher said, never talked about to anyone before.

The lesson to be learned from this is surely that the modern child in the developed world has too little silence in which to come to terms with his own experience, too little confidence in his own word-power to sing what Chinua Achebe once called 'the song of himself,' too little space around what he hears or sees to make those vital pictures in the mind that keep

the imagination lively, active and growing. He IS an artist; but our uphill job, in the television age, is to ensure that he remains one — by becoming a reader.

So let us not underestimate the unique power of the written word.

Poetry as Teacher

John Betjeman, a peculiarly English poet who expressed subtle ideas in a deceptively simple manner, once declared that everyone is a poet who can dance in time to a band at a party or march in step on parade. 'Poetry', he continued, 'is the shortest way of saying things. It also looks nicer on the page than prose. IT GIVES ROOM TO THINK AND DREAM.' It is this 'room to think and dream,' essential to the development of the individual, that is a scarce commodity in modern living.

In today's hurly-burly, one might imagine that people would have caught onto poetry, as they have caught onto Fax machines and Teleprinters, as a quick way of communicating matters of importance. The problem is that whereas business messages and the rise and fall of the dollar are considered matters of vital importance, musings on life, ideas about man and nature are regarded, in the monetarist, mercantile atmosphere of the developed world (the Third World is wiser) as marginal indulgences.

Yet I believe that if we were to give our children in school the opportunity to hear great poems well read (either on tape or by skilled teachers), we would be preparing them for life in the full human sense. We would be opening up for them the real world — through words for which, as hungry artists in the sense I have alluded to, they would be supplying their own never-to-be-forgotten mind-pictures. I still remember vividly my own 'imaging' of *The Lady of Shalott*, *The Forsaken Mer- man*, and *Hiawatha* and can recall the

pleasure of being carried away by the flow of the craftsman's language into MY/their worlds where I could live (in those relatively quiet pre-television days) for as long as I liked. Is it over-fanciful to believe that I have been able to face some of life's vicissitudes the better for having been fed 'as an artist' in my early youth? I honestly do not think so.

But there is no going back. The children of the 1990s are a new species, evolved from us of the 1920s and '30s but with perceptions blunted by a pervading and instantly available common mediocrity culture — a shield against real emotional experience that is hard to penetrate because it is omnipresent. Yet, there IS the opportunity to use good imaginative verse with all the benefits of space on the page in which the imagination can roam freely (as Betjeman pointed out) in the process of helping children to learn to read, through literature.

I have always believed that a book of *Nursery Rhymes*, a *Mother Goose*, is the best possible reading primer. Short lines, rhyming words, repetition, familiarity — all the ingredients are there in *Jack and Jill/Went up the* Well, what else *but* a hill? 'I can read that!' What joy, what confidence — and what a curmudgeon, he who says, 'She isn't reading, she knew it already.' Reading is a massive amalgam of what we already know with what we can guess, held together by the gum of confidence, confidence born of experience that we CAN make sense of the words. If the words not only make sense (many in basal readers do not) but also have depth of meaning and strong imagery, so much the better for the young artist whose life, we must never forget, is very, very short. Feed him on poems like Carl Sandburg's,

*The fog comes
On little cat feet.
It sits looking*

*Over harbour and city
On silent haunches
and then moves on*
and he will be enriched.

I want to digress here a little to examine the fodder children, or young artists as I see them, are currently being offered. The educational presses have a vested interest in keeping children with so-called reading difficulties pelted with under-stimulating material, that, though regrettable, are here to combat. But why should general publishers of high standing allow less-than-poets to publish reams of less-than poetry?

*My sister
Is the slowest eater
You've ever seen.
By the time I've finished
My dinner and I'm ready
To start my ice-cream
She's only just
Picked up
Her knife and fork
Mum says
It's because she doesn't eat
She just talks...*

It's so painful I'll not continue, neither will I name the author, but the publishers are respected; they should surely have insisted that the author, who CAN write decently, worked harder to provide verses of integrity.

I use this example not because it is isolated, but because the low standards it exemplifies are now common to much that is published on respectable lists for children. Behind the flood of banal stories and novels, poems and picture books is the theory that every book must be for every child, that publishers must publish for the biggest possible sale to the widest possible sale to the widest possible market; and that what that entails is that their output should be as vapid as a television 'soap.' But I ask you, my audience in this hall,

to consider for a moment the two examples I have just read. Is there ANY child who would fail to respond imaginatively to Carl Sandburg's Fog/Cat metaphor with a tingling of pleasure? But who could give more than a moment's thought to the so called 'widely accessible' dinner verse? The question I want to ask is: ARE WE NOT UNDERESTIMATING EVERY CHILD'S NATURAL RESPONSE TO ART? In assuming that children from disadvantaged economic and social backgrounds need 'simplified' and 'accessible' material, are we not being insufferably elitist? Looking at what young children themselves write, at their natural powers of self-expression, I believe that we are indeed doing so.

*Sug sug buggly dug
Goes the water in the plug*
wrote Anna Chan, aged 5.

Are we to offer this young poet a basal reader course for her next five formative years? Is she to be led to believe by those general publishers who are jumping on the educational publishers' gravy train that the doggerel about food is poetry? In the mass of over-publishing that exists in the children's field, will Anna Chan ever meet the Sandburgs and Frosts, the Hugheses and Causleys who could be her true mentors? I know that there are reasons (complicated economic reasons) why general publishing for children has taken the paths it has. Nevertheless, we should perhaps use this opportunity to look at the results — and ask if it is not losing its way, surrendering to the demands of a lobby for literacy that (paradoxically) both under-estimates the power of the word itself and gives scant attention to the place of reading for pleasure in the growth of the individual.

Children's Publishing : The Slippery Slope?

As I see it, children's publishing finds itself in a pincer grip between the de-

mands of schools and the competition of television. Schools should be demanding, if anything, the highest quality of work by the most creative authors and artists from the widest possible social and ethnic backgrounds. Genuine creative art is a giant unifying force, as anyone who has read Ted Hughes or Anita Desai, Julius Lester or Roger McGough, Grace Nicholls or Farukh Dhondy with groups of children from mixed social and ethnic backgrounds will surely testify.

Instead, the loudest voices in education seem to be clamouring for general children's lists to reflect the boring banality and (weasel-word) 'accessibility' of the reading scheme. Many publishers in Britain, (there are some notable exceptions, and they are still very much in business), have lost their nerve because of the pressures of the money men in multi-national enterprises and have lowered their standards so that they can increase their output of titles, in short print runs that bring quick profit. So we see publishers beginning to publish not what they believe to be of excellence which can be very broad-based, but what their twin paymasters, the schools and the accountants, demand. Product, not literature. An overwhelmingly large output of middle-of-the-road pap for children is now flooding the market, much of it consisting of books tailored to the schools' often very limited view of the rewards of reading for pleasure. Many of these books are marketed in series, with labels, such as 'for paired reading,' that reflect current trends in education Newspeak. Is every picture book not for 'paired reading?' Who needs a series of uniform little picture books specially structured (so we are told) for the purpose? Far more rewarding to pick up *Where the Wild Things Are*, *Mr. Gumpy's Outing*, or *John Brown, Rose and the Midnight Cat*. What better books could one possibly

have for 'shared reading'?

Let us keep our eyes upon what we are best at and cultivate that. Let us keep in mind the heights to which books for children can rise, fix our eyes on the stars whose light enriches the lives of all. For, if we do not, the day may come when the celebrated picture books and novels are carried away in the flood of mediocrity—many, indeed, are already out-of-print. Then we shall no longer be able to stand up at meetings such as this and make the claims for children's literature as a life force that, in 1990, we still, with honesty, can.

The other arm of the pincer movement, television, is sending children's publishing in the same direction as the pressures from the schools market and the money men. As people interested in the power of the word and committed to the value of reading, I think we have allowed ourselves to be drawn into the vortex of mass-media commercial cynicism and that we are very unwisely trying to apply it to our own field. We shall never rival television as a purveyor of exciting, alluring, half-truths to a wide but rather lazy audience. Neither shall we wean that audience away once it has been hooked. So perhaps, it would be better if we stopped trying to beat television at its own game.

I would certainly take the view that a young person was marginally better occupied reading *Sweet Dreams* or the *Hardy Boys* than watching soaps or Westerns—but mainly because of the pictures in the mind feeding the artist aspect of reading, not because of the content of the entertainment. Neither 'soap' nor *Sweet Dreams*, if recognized as escapist entertainment and absorbed in moderate quantities, does much harm. T.S. Eliot has reminded us that 'mankind cannot stand too much reality'. I only get worried when I hear, as occasionally I do, people who should know

better trying to pass off semi-literature as a welcome (because more readily saleable) alternative to the real thing. It does matter what children read. Neither soap nor semi-literature peddle the emotional truth; both are plot-based, only bringing the emotions to the surface in order to display them, dispel the pain fast, and get things settled in a most un-like-real-life way. Whereas the great authors of our own day and in our own field whose work endures—Philippa Pearce, Margaret Mahy, Patricia Wrightson, Russell Hoban, Ivan Southhall, Betsy Byars, Katherine Paterson—each explores emotion, works with it and round it and through it so that, as in life, it is the characters and situations that interweave to make a story happen.

It may be that I am growing old, that I look back with too much nostalgia at the good days of the 1960s and 1970s when the authors I have just mentioned were in their heyday, but what seriously concerns me now is the apparent decline of the children's novel of high quality. Of course, we have a scattering of rising stars across the English speaking world, but are there as many young authors coming up across the world whose novels will endure? Or are they being drawn away from the children's field because of our expectation that their work should either fit into an educational blueprint (true talent does not work well within guide lines) or rival the television soap? Is children's literature becoming the victim of a muddled social philosophy that confuses excellence with elitism?

If literacy in the developed world is to be worth acquiring in more than the functional sense, we should NOW be concentrating our efforts on ensuring that children of all social and economic backgrounds are given the opportunity to sample, at an early age, the best stories and poems that folk-lore, true poets and

authors of integrity can offer. For we have, as publishers, librarians, teachers, parents to provide for our children an in-built bulwark against the deadening effect of the mass media on the imagination. If we believe that poetry, the picture book, the children's novel have a key role to play in the civilization of the future, let us not be seduced by the idea that quality is irrelevant. The real book is neither a 'supplementary reader' nor a television look-alike. It has a special function, that of feeding the young artist. This is why real books, vigorous entertaining stories from authors who have something to say, should be part and parcel of every child's experience of learning to read.

How ironic it would be if we were to win the battle for universal literacy only to find the quality of children's literature itself in decline?

I make no apology, therefore, for having introduced the question of quality into our debate. It is germane to our case.

Conclusion

Why, one wonders, are there educationists who argue for basal readers, teachers who would not contemplate 'teaching reading' without them, commercial companies who make fortunes selling exceedingly expensive schemes to schools who say they cannot afford real books? The answer must surely be that we have already bred a generation of non-readers who, by technical expertise rather than by the quality of their imagination, have found their way into education and who, therefore, feel threatened by the suggestion that anything so amorphous and adventurous and unaccountable and glorious as 'free range' reading might take the place of those safe, graded, test-inviting, worry-free but boring basal readers.

If I were a passionate theorist with no practical experience, if my life had not

taken me into schools as well as into publishing and journalism, I would stand before you here and say what I would dearly like to say: that it is possible, in International Literacy Year of which this meeting is a part, to persuade educators in the developed world to substitute real books for basal readers in the teaching of reading, and by so doing, encourage countries at a different stage of development who are tackling illiteracy urgently, and necessarily, at the moment, by different means, to follow suit in due course.

I would like to be able to say this, because I believe that only real books can produce real readers, and I believe real readers are blessed people, and I fear that a world full of non-readers will fail to address imaginatively the horrendous planetary problems that confront us. From the ozone layer to human engineering, the crying need is for the leaders in thought to confront our dilemmas imaginatively and to impress their findings upon politicians and the rest of us. For, it is not true that we can do nothing. Given the right leadership, the imaginative leap, each of us can do something, and that something multiplied by millions could begin to change the course of history.

In our own small way, we must try to make ourselves heard by the politicians who, whilst mouthing platitudes about standards of literacy and the rise (or fall) of the illiteracy rate are nevertheless in thrall to the publishers of commercial reading schemes. It is because they, and many non-reader teachers and tele-fixated parents, favour basal readers that I do not foresee a wholesale change of heart and practice. Dealing in realities, I think that what we must press for is a strong presence of real books in every classroom, hopefully as the main resource for progress in reading, but in such places as scepticism remains, as a glorious light for

children, a light that, by its very presence, leaves no child in doubt about the main purpose of learning to read.

If we look at the work of Maurice Sendak or Edward Ardizzone, of Beatrix Potter or Barbara Cooney, of Ron Brooks and Jennie Wagner, of John Burningham or Quentin Blake or Arnold Lobel, we are at once entertained, enthralled and challenged. If we read *Charlotte's Web* or *Tom's Midnight Garden*, *Josh* or *The Eighteenth Emergency*, *The Nargun and the Stars* or *Memory*, we close the book, in the words of Fay Weldon, 'ourselves but subtly changed by the experience'.

This is the quality of work that we must hope may soon become the staple fare of library corners in every classroom of the developed world. As adults we surely remember so vividly certain books we read as children, that re-reading them, we recall not only our nine-year-old selves, but the place where we read them. We remember how we feared, loved, wept, laughed, and imagined, as well-fed young artists in the Coomaraswamy sense, while reading the stories of *Black Beauty* or *Tom Sawyer*, *Treasure Island* or *Five Children and It*.

Indeed, I would venture to suggest that the reason most of us find ourselves in Williamsburg this week is because we recall our childhood reading with delight. But if we are concerned to bring to the generation now lured by the quick gratifications offered by television our own lifelong joy in picturing for ourselves the stories great authors have told us, we must stand firm. Each one of us, wherever we come from, must have as our aim, in the near or distant future, the achievement of literacy through a children's literature wide in its compass that speaks truthfully to the young about the human condition. Anything less must dilute our message and weaken our cause.